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NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN
DESIGN DEPARTMENT

**FINNISH DESIGN,
THE UNEMBELLISHED SURFACE**

by
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and Complementary Studies
In Candidacy for
the Degree of Bachelor Design (Printed Textiles)

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Louise Geraghty, typist

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The Finnish Institute, London

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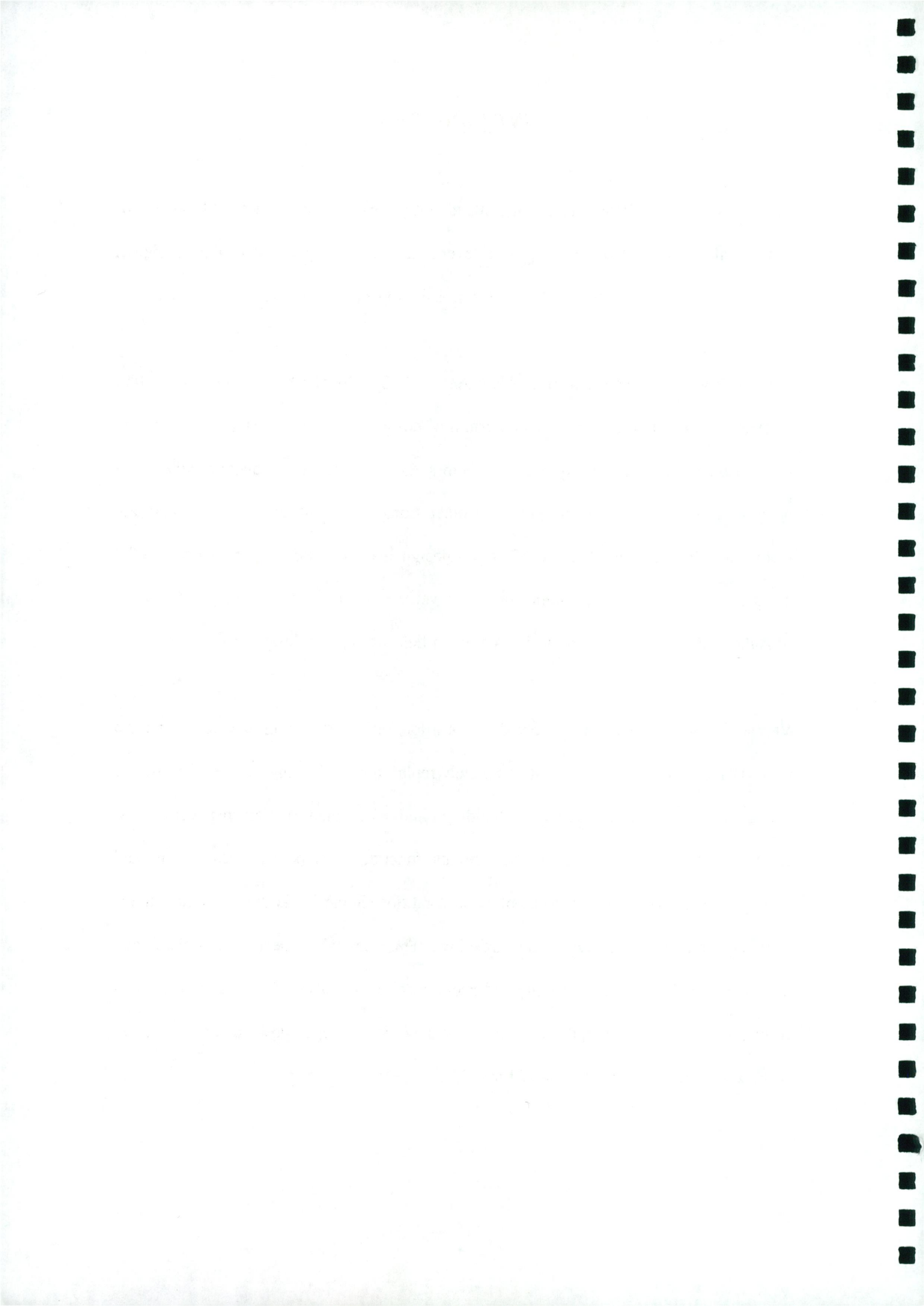
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INTRODUCTION

There is something almost raw about Finland and yet its designs are not cold, austere or rigid- qualities one would expect from a severe climate, and for which modern design is often criticised. How can it be both elegant and simple without being cold and bare?

This thesis will examine the work of Alvar Aalto (1898-1976) and Kaj Franck (1911-1989) as examples of Finnish restraint and warmth of design. This unique balance of restraint and warmth could be attributed to several factors, among them Finnish history, culture and geography which are quite distinct from other European countries. Another important factor contributing to the balance of Finnish design is their respect for traditional "folk" or "peasant" objects. The phenomenon of the vernacular in Finnish design ties the work of Aalto and Franck together and is a common link throughout design in Finland.

Vernacular objects in Finland evolved out of a long and persevering process. After the ancient hunting culture was almost completely replaced by a farming culture, the farmers and their families constructed their buildings and made their implements themselves. Gradually, through trial and error, the form and function of the objects became more and more practical. However, the severe physical conditions in particular the long cold winter, kept the land poor and living standards low. This inevitably meant that objects and implements had to be made frugally and economically. Occasionally, foreign influences from continental courts crept into Finland but they were stripped down and simplified to fit in with a more practical view of life.



These age-old attitudes and approaches have survived as a living tradition, perhaps protected by their geographical isolation. As their work illustrates, Aalto and Franck maintained a respect and appreciation for the simple ingenuity of vernacular, traditional handicrafts - a concept many modern designers ignore. As Periäinen observes,

When we follow the course taken by Finnish design since ancient times, it often seems that our forests and villages have survived as original models, as it were, of human living, something that later developments have covered up elsewhere in Europe and the West. (Poutasuo, 1987, p11)

Today the term "vernacular" is generally interpreted as the material heritage of a mostly agricultural population. Often in peripheral countries like Finland these "folk" objects are placed as examples of cultural purity. This means that ancient values are of special importance to a current civilisation trying to regain a lost identity or style. What Finland has managed to do is to learn from these traditional objects, forms and attitudes and approaches to produce practical yet warm design.

Another aspect of the term "vernacular", according to János Gelre, is a search for the mother tongue of forms, a "*spiritual heritage*", that is a search for roots of people's most ancient history (Bowe, 1993, p143). This may sound a somewhat romanticised interpretation but it is nonetheless applicable in that it is concerned with the unchanged forms of expression of an indigenous race and their integration into mainstream culture.

This thesis will show how Finnish design remembers traditional forms of expression and manages to combine them with modern society.

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CHAPTER ONE

FINNISH DESIGN: THE UNEMBELLISHED SURFACE, THE UNFILLED SPACE

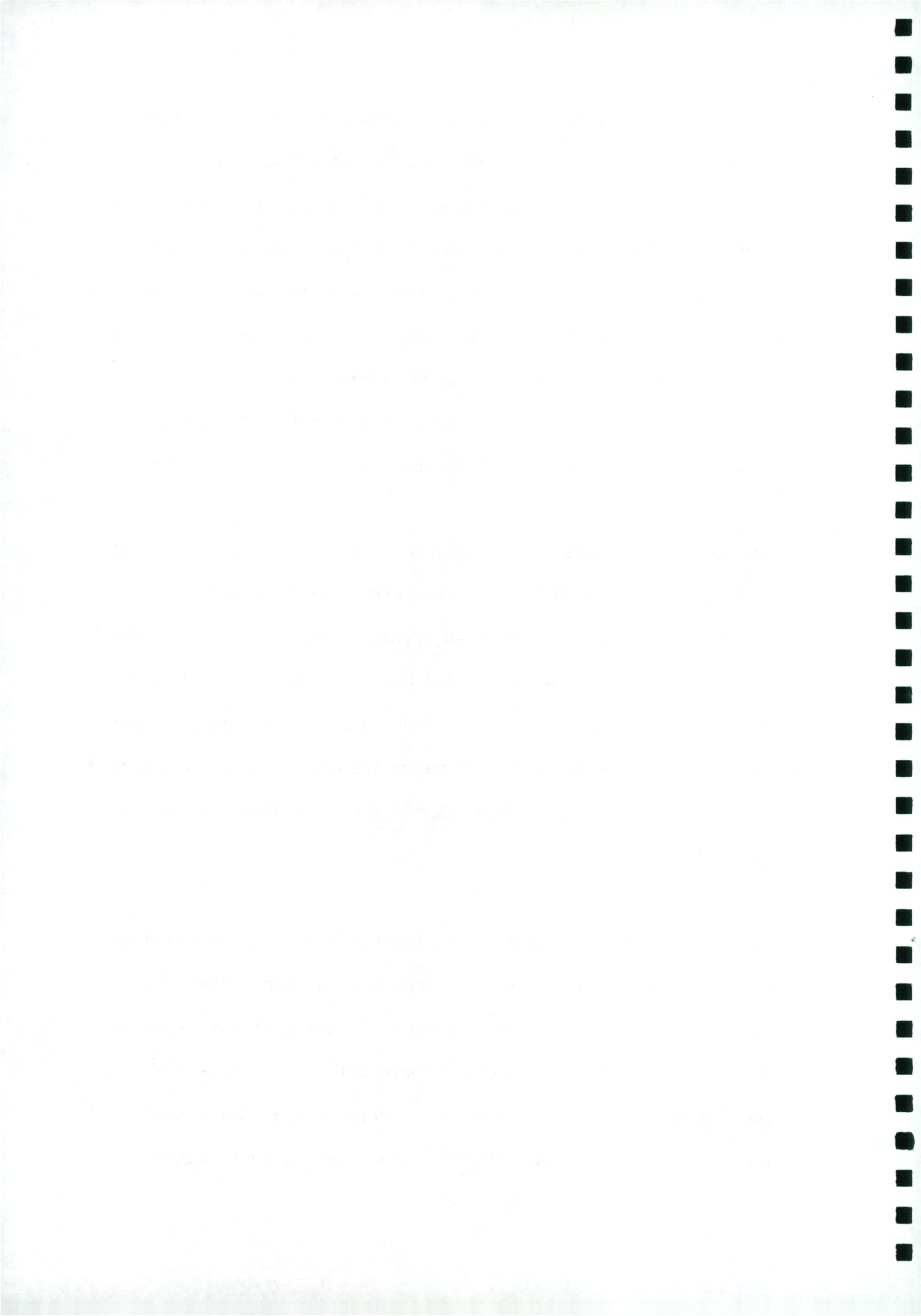
Finnish designers are not afraid of the unembellished surface. They tend to restrain themselves from cluttering up un-filled spaces, knowing that beautiful things can be simple. How refreshing this is to those who appreciate simplicity - beauty in its most primitive form. Spareness seems to come intuitively to these northern people. From the demands of living in a bitter climate, they know instinctively that warmth is a luxury and is never used wastefully or unnecessarily. They have a reputation for being a silent people. When they do speak they are apt to be direct with a contempt for artifice - a quality often translated into their designs.

The singling out of Aalto, almost an institution 20 years after his death, and the less well-known but equally innovative Franck is a useful way, not only of expressing the course of Modernism in Finland, but also the influence Finland had on that movement. Both men are emblematic of the human element that Finnish modern design preserved, with their organic forms and belief in natural materials. Although Aalto's and Franck's designs are examples of thinking stripped down to the essentials, they never lost sight of the human element - an important factor which their German counterparts had sacrificed. Franck, insisted that "*The purpose of design is to serve people whereas nowadays people tend to serve design*" (Form, Function, Finland, 1987, p45)

Today the average Finn lives with simple, well-designed things in their homes. Franck's *Kilta* tableware (1953) for example, became over the years the unobtrusive standard everyday dishes in Finnish homes. The high standards of exported Finnish design are the accepted normal standards at home, where design is spelt with a Capital "D". It is one of the few countries where industrial designers are more famous than independent painters. Indeed, Aalto's face on the 50 mark banknote indicates that they are even elevated to the status of national heroes. Given the role the industrial arts played in Finland's reconstruction earlier this century, it is necessary to examine Finland's historical and cultural background to see how its design functions at the level it has achieved today.

In spite of being well behind its Scandinavian neighbours, both "Danish Modern" and "Swedish Modern" were established as significant styles by 1939, the Finnish impact on the world market was both more dramatic and effective. A Finnish style had evolved that was practical yet highly expressive and had little in common with Sweden's and Denmark's socially democratic approach to design. Instead, Penny Sparke claims that Finland's design, in particular its postwar programme, was a "*sophisticated, well-executed exercise in public relations and marketing*" (Sparke, 1980, p149) which gave them their unique position.

While this may be true - Finnish design benefitted from an extraordinary level of co-operation and major investments from large companies and the state - Finnish designers are unique for another reason: Finland is their home. This may sound simplistic because it can be said so is Sweden to the Swedes or Norway to the Norwegians, but Finland's ecology, history and culture do not follow the usual pattern as in other Scandinavian countries and in the rest of the industrialised West. For that reason, according to



Periäinen, *"the factors that lie behind Finnish design are interesting"* (Poutasuo, 1990, p6). He goes on to say that design everywhere follows the same basic principles, that is that the form taken by objects is related to the interaction between place (geography and ecology), time (history), human activity (culture) and communication, and because these factors are unusual in Finland, its design functions in a different way.

Historical and Cultural Background

Behind Finnish design lies the distinctive features of Finnish nature, the history, the people and their character. Although continually categorised as such, Finland is different from her Scandinavian neighbours: Norway, Sweden and Denmark, with their apparently more cultivated histories. Physical conditions in Finland have always been tough and demanding. To this day, the Finns are acutely aware of their roots.

In 1809, after 100 years of Swedish rule, Finland was surrendered to Russia, and became an autonomous Grand Duchy. Relations between Finland and Russia worsened during the 1890s, the so-called years of oppression, encouraging an already emerging national movement. Finland was mostly agrarian and was kept that way long after industrialisation had occurred elsewhere. The rural population was poorly educated, in 1906 however, the parliamentary system was reformed and provided a one chamber government and equal freedom for men and women. With this reform it could be said that Finland moved from, arguably the most backward systems of government in Scandinavia to the most enlightened. The new freedom gave a voice to the growing social and economic problems,

and a national liberation movement took shape. An individual national style emerged. A precedent was set for high design standards. Architects and craftsmen received great respect as they were seen as the shapers of national identity. This rise in national awareness led to a revival of traditional forms of expression throughout Finland, and interest in handicrafts was re-awoken.

Finland finally gained its status as an independent state in 1917. The movement had helped secure a way forward for Finnish identity. Independence presented a challenge to Finnish designers. How could the new national identity be expressed in architecture and design? The beginnings of Aalto's career paralleled this historical development. Decades later, Franck was in similar circumstances, responding to the needs of his society in the aftermath of World War Two. The "Finnishness" of their designs is not due so much to the national character of their designs, but to their interest and respect for national peasant culture and the national pride this brought about.

The Placing of Vernacular as an Example of Cultural Purity is Important to Countries on the Periphery of Europe

In many of these aspects, Ireland emerged from and into a similar situation to Finland, after gaining its independence in 1922. Like Finland, Ireland is also on the fringe of Europe. The Finns have a saying that their country developed "behind God's back" - they have always felt disadvantaged, on the edge of Europe, removed and isolated. Yet it could

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be argued that such marginality is to their advantage, helping them search for expression within their own borders, preserving and forging ahead with what they have always had.

There was in Ireland, also in the nineteenth century, a growing sense of the connection between culture and an awareness of nationality. Ireland also suffered from poverty, famine and rural depopulation comparable with Finland's, twenty or so years later in the 1860s. Architectural and artistic inspiration in Finland was drawn from the great mythical epic *The Kalevala*, collected verbally and published for the first time in 1835 during the National Movement (analogous with the Young Ireland Movement). The besieged eastern province of Karelia, near the Russian border, provided a wealth of inspiration. It was an unspoilt rural area, rich in folklore and visual and musical traditions.

Similar to the strategically placed Karelia, it was to the advantage of the Celtic Revival in Ireland that Connemara and the impoverished islands off the west coast were of no political interest to England. They were to inspire literature, music, language and the arts.

This artistic manifestation of national aspirations culminated in the establishment of the Free State in 1922. Such unrest and political ferment, with its long-held hope for an independent state, allies the Irish movement with Finland's national romanticism. There are further parallels with Ireland in Finland's striving to establish Finnish rather than Swedish as the national language.

The beginning of this century, before revolution brought an end to a largely feudal society, is referred to as the Golden Age both in Ireland and Finland. The early years of this century are known as the most creative era of modern Ireland. The same period in

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Finland centred around the nationalist art of Akseli-Gallen Kallela (1865-1931), the composer Jean Sibelius and the architects Eliel Saarinen and Lars Snock. They formed the quest for a true national style using honest, native, expressive materials. Fuelled by political and economic restraints, they strived to assert a national style, rooted in a vernacular past but looking very much to the future.

Unlike these figures in Finland's revival, there was no tradition of artists, architects or patrons erecting houses in vernacular forms in Ireland. Nor did Irish architects make any outstanding contributions to pavilions erected in contemporary exhibitions. Manning Robertson blames this on a

lack of co-operation, not only between architect and craftsman, but among craftsmen and artists themselves. It is only when architects and craftsmen form a united front that good work can force its sway against the stream of mediocrity that carries its way, no less in Ireland than in England (Bowe, 1993, p196)

Perhaps this is why Ireland, unlike the Finns, did not instinctively grasp the chance to utilise its own wealth of resources to inspire and produce good design when it emerged into a similar situation.

In 1962 a Scandinavian group consisting of six industrial designers and design teachers of international reputation - three from Denmark, one from Sweden and two from Finland (among them Kaj Franck) - were asked to assess the standards of design in Ireland for Córas Tráchtála. In their view, "because of her lack of sophistication in design matters, Ireland had a unique opportunity, denied by circumstances to many more developed

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countries" (Scandinavian Design Group, 1962, p4). With courage and foresight, they believed the possibilities could be realised.

Of course it would be wrong to press Ireland to adopt Scandinavian ideas. In fact, they strongly advised against transplanting features of Scandinavian design to Ireland. Such an approach would *"kill what can be saved and what still exists of the original Irish values and culture and stifle the development of true Irish tradition"* (Scandinavian Design Group, 1962, p6). It is only very recently, however, that Irish designers are being inspired by and preserving tradition in a contemporary, fresh way. Like Finland has managed to do, Ireland increasingly seeks to hold onto a great natural gift and retain a respect for Irish geography, ecology, history and culture.

Finnish Design Searches For Expression Within Its Own Country

Finnish design is tied to the severe terms of sub-arctic nature, like a refrigerator, the cold climate has preserved models of thinking and acting tried out in practice (Periäinen, 1990)

As this suggests, age-old practices in Finland have survived as a living tradition. Inextricably linked to this is Finland's unusual climate. Nature and climate are, therefore, arguably the most important and influential preconditions of Finnish design. And harsh as it can be, the environment is everything to the Finns. Today, the average Finn has a secluded cottage by a lake in the wilderness. Thousands spend their free time fishing through the ice in winter, thousands of others skiing cross-country.

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The Finns themselves find it hard to understand why outsiders think they suffer "extremely severe" winters. They do not regard their country as a cold place. To live in Finland today it is a modern nation which has adjusted to the demands of its climate: roads are never blocked, trains keep on running, pipes rarely freeze. The cold is a reality that is faced with the help of age-old traditions which eliminate anything that deserves to be called suffering.

The cold climate has taught the Finns a way of life which they have been able to apply to other areas of life as well - such as design. Since the weather is not regarded as a hostile force, there is no reason to fight it, but there is no need to submit to it either. The thing to do is to find the proper balance and rhythm.

The clear, stark beauty of Finland can often be trivialised as the icy lakes and sparkling coastlines are credited with the inspiration of every "Finnish" object. Aalto's Savoy Vase (1936) typifies this with its undulating curves; this almost sacred respect for nature pervades their designs.

This does not mean merely the decorative or imitative use of nature's themes, forms and images, but something much deeper and innate. Somewhat like the Japanese, they acknowledge the physical properties of whatever material they use, instinctively interpreting and applying the laws of nature.

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CHAPTER TWO

ALVAR AALTO - HUMANISER OF THE MACHINE AGE

European Modernism

In his essay *Ornament and Crime*, Adolf Loos bemoans the fact that

those objects without ornament which mankind had created in earlier centuries had been carelessly discarded and destroyed. We possess no carpenter's benches of the Carolingian period... Instead any rubbish which had even the smallest ornament was collected (Marcus, 1995, p48)

Up until the beginning of this century, artistic appreciation in Europe had long been biased towards embellishment and ornamentation. The idea that design need not be dependent on decoration, and still be beautiful, evolved from the example set in England at the end of the last century - reflected mostly in the writings of William Morris and John Ruskin, and the solid handcrafted objects made by the Arts and Crafts Societies. These had a direct influence on Germany when they began to be included in exhibitions and imported for sale there.

Following Morris's ideas, a number of societies of artists, craftsmen and manufacturers were established in Germany about this time, although they did not participate in his utopian socialist ideal of the "brotherhood" of craftsmen. They were too practical, economically, to support his rejection of the machine. Rather, their goal was to bring artistic values to industry through the control of product design by artists - whether it was

for handmade work or machine production. The Deutscher Werkbund, an umbrella association of artists, manufacturers and workshops, was founded in 1907, dedicated to promoting quality in industry. It is the organisation that has most consistently been linked with the rejection of ornament and the introduction of a modern style that eventually came to be associated with the aesthetics of machine production.

The objection made to much of this twentieth century design is that it is "inhuman". When confronted by smooth or simple surfaces people tend to feel uncomfortable or nervous. *"An extreme austerity is endurable only when it serves some particular purpose - as in the laboratory or the convent"* (Brett, 1972, p93) The eye hunts for irregularity with increasing frustration. A softer, more human element is needed to correct the balance.

Giving Modern Design A Human Face

Aalto's Architecture and Furniture Designs as Examples

Aalto's furniture is a pertinent example of Finland's human version of Modernism. In Finland, almost every public space - school, hospital, bus station, canteen, even government building - is furnished with Aalto's simple birch stools or curvy bentwood chairs. *"The designer's icons have become those of the republic"* (Redhead, 1995).

According to Penny Sparke, Modernism was

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These traits can certainly be applied to Aalto's work. But whereas Le Corbusier, for example, based his principles on mechanisation, referring frequently to the practices of mass-production in the automobile industry, Aalto's thinking seemed more approachable and human - no doubt influenced by the instinctive wisdom embodied in the Finnish vernacular tradition.

Le Corbusier believed that "*mechanisation is based on geometry, that is our very language, by which I mean that geometry denotes order and that mankind expresses itself through order*" (Le Corbusier, 1974, p255). In contrast to this, the need to give modern design a human face was an inherent and recurrent theme in Aalto's work - especially in his architecture.

Although he was committed to the virtues and economic necessity of rationalising and standardising designs for production, his gentle forms and use of natural materials suggested a warmer approach. It suggested both a personal and regional identity quite different from the values of anonymity promoted by modern designers elsewhere.

Although Aalto's influence reached far beyond the borders of Finland, his designs emerged as specific solutions to his country's needs. The fact that Finland was Aalto's home was, perhaps, the most dominant influence on his humanised designs. Finland's location, isolation and desire for a new, independent identity, gave him the scope and created the necessary atmosphere of design freedom. Like most Finnish designers who

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create freely, he was unburdened by foreign concepts. In him was ingrained a unique attitude which few modern designers have managed to successfully emulate - exposure to nature and the habit of approaching one's career as a public servant. His use of warm natural materials, well-planned lighting, acoustics and orientation to the site and the sun distinguished his designs from those of his contemporaries.

With these elements, Aalto introduced a human facet to modern architecture not evident before. The TB Sanatorium (1928) (*Figure 1*) he designed in Paimio for example, was the very building that catapulted him into the international architectural elite. In this design, he combined ideas and influences from Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius to produce a design unmistakably his own. Aalto thought of health care as a joint effort by architects and physicians. This attitude is illustrated especially clearly in the Paimio Sanatorium in which every architectural detail has a clinical function. He paid special attention to the patient's rooms, which had splash-free wash-stands, radiant ceiling heating, a view of the surrounding forest - and were thus designed to contribute to the treatment. Describing the Paimio Sanatorium, Aalto said

The main purpose of the building is to function as a medical instrument... one of the basic re-requisites for healing is to provide complete peace... The room design is determined by the depleted strength of the patient, reclining in his bed. The colour of the ceiling is chosen for quietness, the light sources are outside the patient's field of vision, the heating is orientated towards the patient's feet and the water runs soundlessly from the taps to make sure that no patient disturbs his neighbour (Schildt, 1994, p68)

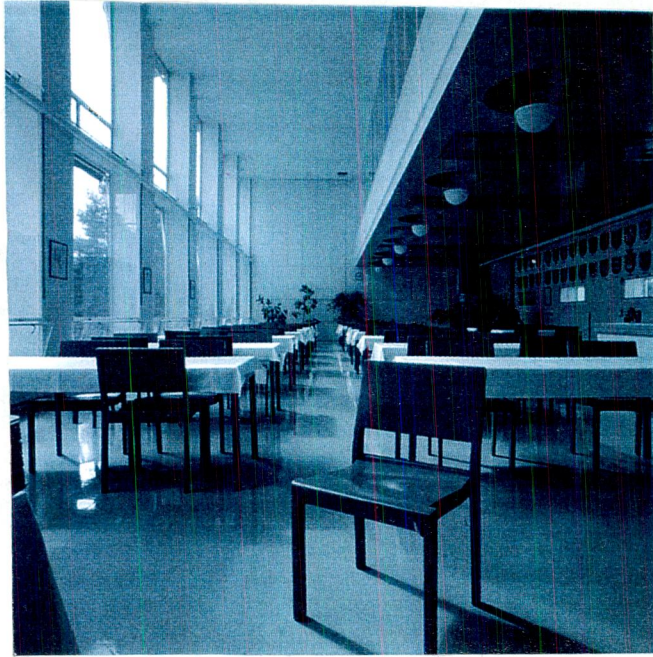
Although he describes the building in clinical terms as a "*medical instrument*", he adds the architectural details for human comfort. The highly rationalised and technological

creative itself, he was underpinned by foreign concepts. In this way ingrained a unique attitude which few modern designers have managed to successfully emulate - exposure to nature and the habit of approaching one's career as a public servant. His use of warm natural materials, well-planned lighting, acoustics and orientation to the site and the sun distinguished his designs from those of his contemporaries.

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The main purpose of the building is to function as a medical instrument... one of the basic requirements for healing is to provide complete peace... The room design is determined by the depleted strength of the patient. The colour of the ceiling is chosen for quietness, the reclining in his bed. The colour of the ceiling is chosen for quietness, the light sources are outside the patient's field of vision, the heating is orientated towards the patient's feet and the water runs soundlessly from the taps to make sure that no patient disturbs his neighbour (Schmidt, 1994, p68).

Although he describes the building in clinical terms as a "medical instrument", he adds the architectural details for human comfort. The highly rationalised and technological



Aalto's furniture for the Paimio sanatorium, above, included a bentwood armchair, bottom left, and the simple 611 dining chair which is still in use in the hospital today, left

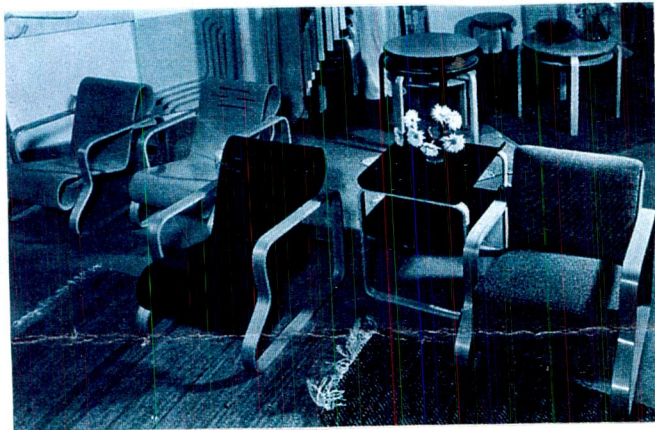
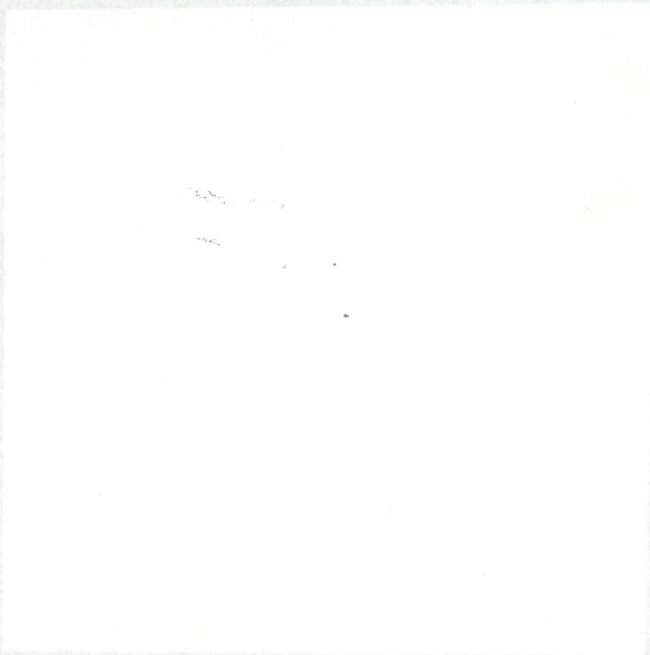


Figure 1
Paimio Sanatorium, Alvar Aalto (1928)



direction of modern health care however made it difficult for Aalto to reconcile medical and nature related aims convincingly. He took part in several hospital design competitions, but had no more success after the Paimio victory, in which he won first prize.

Aalto's "Organic" Furniture

The word "Organic" may sometimes apply to architecture, but most certainly to Aalto's special use of wood as a material. He cannot be said to have invented the principle of bentwood, but he found an entirely new method of doing it. The item of furniture which first indicated Aalto's ingenuity was the Paimio Arm Chair (c1930), designed for the Paimio Tuberculosis Sanatorium. To make it he perfected a system of bending birchwood using the wood's own moisture. This produced a shape that was organic yet reproducible in quantity. His justification for the Paimio chair was not completely based on considerations of industrial production or requirements of aesthetic form; in his mind, the 110 degree angle of the back eased a TB patient's breathing. The chair was light and easily moved and was quieter than many of the traditional steel furnishings used in hospitals. The surface of the chair was also easily cleaned (Figure 2).

One can see how Aalto was influenced by mainland European Modernists. His chair aligns itself with the Modern movement's commitment to lightness rather than weight and to space rather than mass. The similarities between his Paimio armchair (and later the Cantilevered Arm Chair) and Mies van der Rohe's chair are evident (*Figure 3*). Van der

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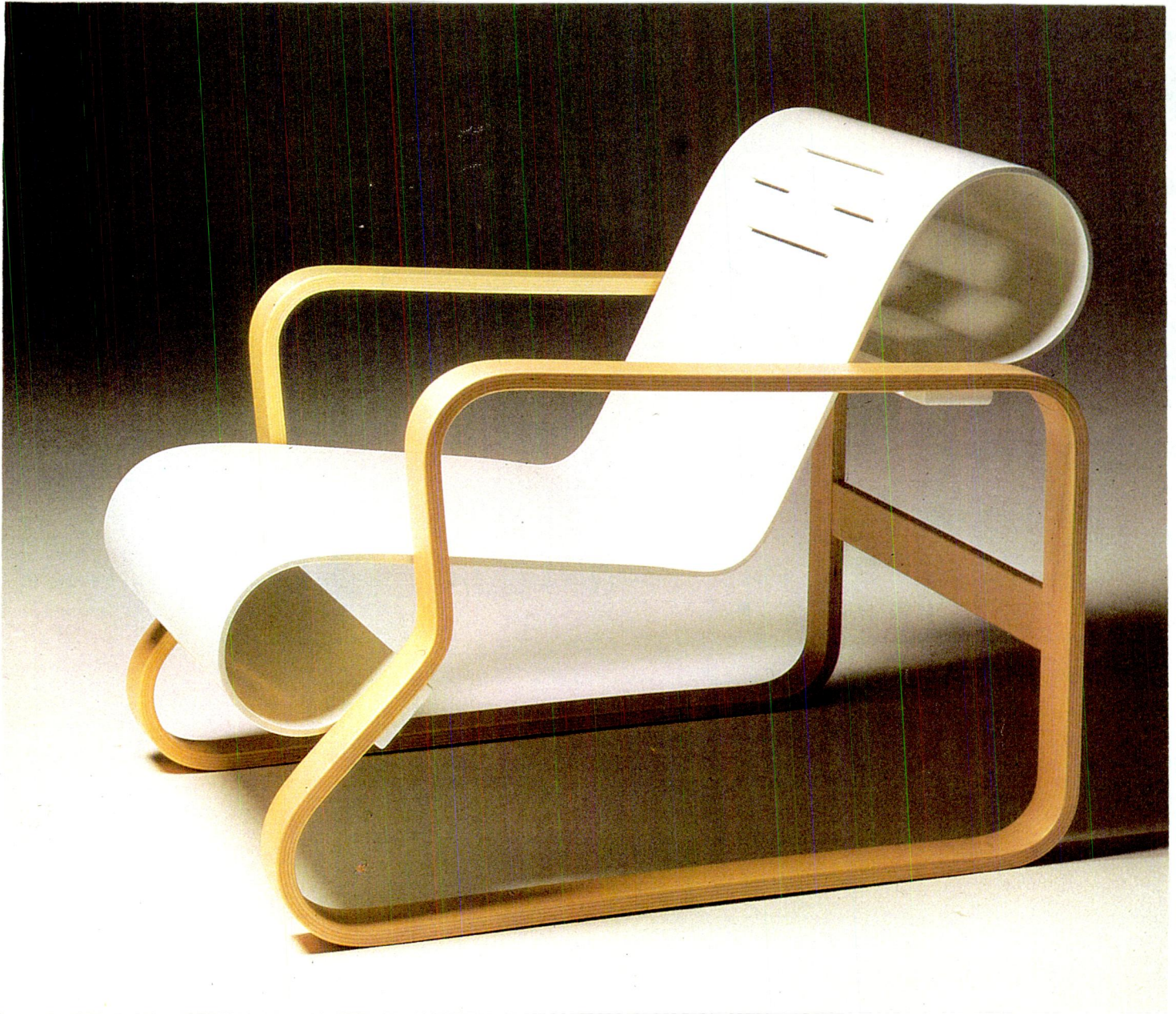


Figure 2
Paimio Arm Chair, Alvar Aalto (1930)





Figure 3
Tubular Steel Chair, Mies Van der Rohe (1927)



Rohe's chair was designed at The Bauhaus in 1927, three years before Aalto's. Already his chair, although rationally designed indicated that Aalto was following a different path: the softer Finnish way rather than the more sober European style. Any modern material could have provided the features of the chair, but for Aalto, the naturalness and familiarity of wood lessened the coldness of institutional finishing - therefore making it the most appropriate material.

From the Paimio armchair, developed the Cantilevered Armchair¹, with a laminated wooden base (1946) (*Figure 3*) - arguably one of the most outstanding contributions to twentieth century furniture design. Since Mart Stam's introduction of this modern construction feature in the mid 1920s, steel had been the only material considered strong enough for its execution. By 1929 however, Aalto had become convinced that laminated wood also had enough strength to support a cantilevered seat. His first attempts were unsuccessful, but after four years of research he reached a stable design - the one first used in the Paimio Sanatorium. The basis of this design set a pattern for his later models, of which the webbed 1946 Cantilevered Armchair became the most renowned. The frame is composed of two C-shaped supporting sides that were connected with horizontal braces at the front and upper back. These braces also served as the foundation to which the seat/back was attached.

The success of the design hinged on the ability of the laminated base to provide the necessary stability. Because stress was greatest on the lower, supporting half of the framework, Aalto constructed a lamination of seven layers just below the front edge of the

¹Cantilever is a structural detail, seen in both furniture and architectural design, in which a horizontal member projects beyond a vertical support, resulting in a light, floating effect.

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From the Paimio sanatorium, developed the 'Candlestick Armchair', with a laminated wooden base (1946) (Väyrynen 3) - arguably one of the most outstanding contributions to twentieth century furniture design. Since Alvar Saar's introduction of this modern construction feature in the mid 1920s, steel had been the only material considered strong enough for its execution. By 1929 however, Aalto had become convinced that laminated wood also had enough strength to support a candlestick seat. His first attempts were unsuccessful, but after four years of research he reached a stable design - the one first used in the Paimio Sanatorium. The basis of this design set a pattern for his later models, of which the webbed 1946 'Candlestick Armchair' became the most renowned. The frame is composed of two C-shaped supporting sides that were connected with horizontal braces at the front and upper back. These braces also served as the foundation to which the seat/back was attached.

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¹ 'Candlestick' is a structural detail, seen in both furniture and architectural design, in which a horizontal member projects beyond a vertical support, resulting in a light, floating effect.



Figure 4
Cantilevered Arm Chair, Alvar Aalto (1946)



seat. The entire arm section was thinner in profile because extra reinforcement was not needed there. The webbed textile covering was more comfortable than the plywood seat. Later he introduced models with foam-cushioned seats, backs and even padded head rests, while keeping the original cantilevered base design. This 1946 remake met with wide acceptance due to its more resilient, form-fitting surface. The form gently undulates to conform to and support the human backbone. The back of the chair extends higher than the earlier plywood model to give more support to the upper back and neck.

Aalto's furniture emerged from Finland's most abundant natural resource - wood. His recognition of wood's psychological, practical and economical advantages confirmed it as a major material for twentieth century design. His innovations proved that wood was as fitting as tubular steel for furniture in our era. Today, the 1946 cantilevered Armchair is still on the market with black, brown or natural cotton webbing, or of vinyl, leather or canvas quilting. The entire framework is of laminated birch, finished with a clear varnish which gives a mellow, natural satiny glow and feel when seen at firsthand. *"Wood used in a new - or ancient - way, without mannerism and with such exquisite economy, wood which made chrome and steel furniture seem old-fashioned."* (Redhead, 1995, p1).

To a Finn, the prospect of returning home after a day of only five hours daylight and sub-zero temperatures to relax in tubular steel furniture was far from inviting. Psychologically as well as physically, the material would have only added to the actual coldness. Aalto's wooden furniture provided a warmer, quieter, lighter more human alternative.

Its abundance, ease of processing, inexpensiveness and thermal qualities certainly make wood an obvious choice for the Finns. Practicality alone, however, does not explain why

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the Finns took to Aalto's furniture. Aalto's organic forms seem to strike a chord in the country's soul - not just humanising Modernism but nationalising it as well. Wood has unique emotional and tactile qualities. Trees and forests have a multitude of meanings in Finnish mythology and folklore. The life-protecting symbolism of wood is strong, and even today Finns look to the forests for relaxation from the pace of urban life. And Aalto worked in the most symbolic of trees - the birch, the "white tree of mystery" to the Finns.

An example of modern, understated elegance combined with the Finnish vernacular is Aalto's stool for the Municipal Library in Viipuri (1935). As with the Paimio Sanatorium he designed the building and then created a furniture collection for it. This stacking stool is one of the most original and copied pieces of furniture ever (*Figure 5*).

The design, begun in 1930, was based on a simple yet unique furniture joint. The innovation was the durable and economical, yet elegant "Aalto Leg" which bent to form a right angle that could wrap under the seat - or a table top - and be secured with screws. Hence the age-old problem of connecting vertical legs to horizontal surfaces was bypassed. For this revolutionary process of forming the legs, Aalto received a patent in 1935.

The simple Viipuri Stacking Stool was the first furniture design to fully realise the economic effectiveness of only four wooden parts: three "Aalto Legs" and a normal seat. The legs were attached in such a way as to facilitate stacking.

As was typical of Aalto's all-inclusive furniture, the stool was available in both adult and children's sizes. Its durable construction and finish make it suitable for use in high wear

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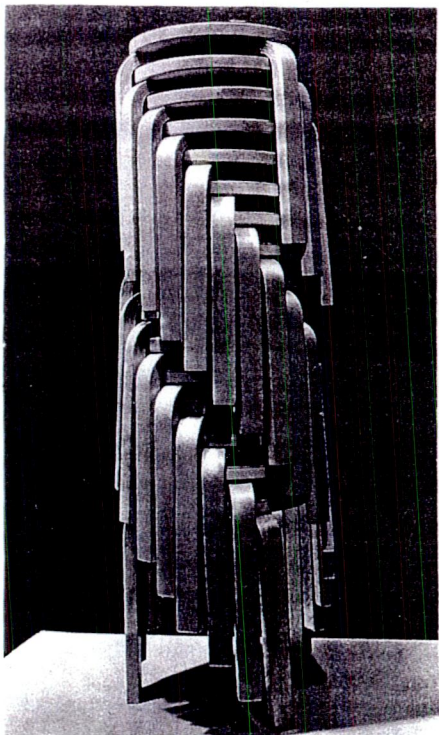


Figure 5
Viipuri Stacking Stool, Alvar Aalto (1935) - easily stacked

environments - from schools to public buildings. Like his armchairs, they are adaptable to a variety of settings and are equally suitable in a home environment because of their unobtrusive warmth.

Compactness derives from the time when Finns had to build small-scale and to tradition. The old Finnish farmhouse contained very little furniture - maybe a wooden table, a long wooden bench and a few tools. Even today, Finnish furniture design tends to be modest. Aalto's furniture preserved vernacular traditions that expressed the unpretentious simplicity of farm life (*Figure 6*). His designs, although they were innovative and modern, they were not at the expense of the heritage which he valued and respected so highly. Therefore, although mass-produced, they did not seem like machine art.

Sixty years on, Aalto's furniture is still being made and marketed by Artek (the word "Artek" shows the link between art and technology). Aalto and his wife founded Artek in 1935 as a shop window for his experiments in bent-wood technology, alongside his textiles, glass and light fittings. As well as being a commercial operation, a written constitution declared that it was to be a meeting point for modernism: a forum and a gallery for the new wave of national and international design. In the 1950s, Artek expanded its concerns, sponsoring large exhibitions and employing young designers to extend Aalto's principles. Year after year, his furniture, virtually unaltered from his original designs, is still in demand. "*Invisibly visible*" (Artek booklet), they seem to possess a timelessness that makes them versatile and equally suitable in a small, modest room as in a great building or public space. While it is true that he conceived of furniture as incidental to his architecture, to be created within it, who today would associate his chairs and tables with the original buildings? Simply, they are Aalto furniture (*Figure 7*).

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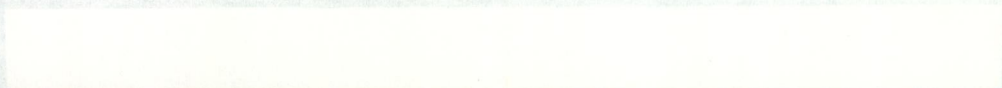
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Figure 6

Traditional Finnish Chair, probably late Nineteenth Century, and Chair designed by Aalto (1931)







artek tel. 177 533

A black and white photograph of a modern armchair. The chair has a light-colored, possibly metal, frame with a curved design. The seat and backrest are made of a dark, woven material. The chair is positioned in a room with a dark floor and a light-colored wall.

Furniture by Alvar Aalto
ETELÄESPLANADI 18
open mon-fri 10-18, sat 10-15

Figure 7
Artek, making and marketing Aalto's furniture today

CHAPTER THREE

KAJ FRANCK - THE CONSCIENCE OF FINNISH DESIGN

The ideas of functionalism were directed usually towards objects made for use in the home, where the dangers of excessive ornamentation were likely to be lurking. Kaj Franck's (1911-1989) ceramic designs are examples of familiar everyday objects stripped down to the bare essentials - unaffected, without embellishment or make-believe. One of the basis' of his ideology was a belief in the timelessness of elementary geometry and the structural clarity and functionality of classical modernism.

The Stockholm Exhibition of Industrial Art in 1930, which launched functionalism in Scandinavia, was an important source of inspiration for him. He also stressed the social responsibility of designers. His life's work can be seen as a quest for harmony between man and industrially produced objects, to reproduce universal and anonymous articles. He bemoaned the fact that

The timeless staple object is no more and industrial production has turned into a conglomeration of quasi-styles, thus accelerating the turnover of models. Technology has made this possible while upsetting the natural balance (Form, Function, Finland, 1987, p44)

It was his belief that design was a process of constructive teamwork and interaction, in which the designer played a clear supporting role. His philosophy was to give equal consideration to the user, the material and the manufacturing process.

THE REPORT

THE COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES

The Commission of the European Communities has the honour to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the 10th of June 1982, in which you requested information on the progress of the work of the Commission in the field of the environment.

The Commission has been working hard to fulfil its obligations in this field. It has been particularly active in the area of the environment, and has been working closely with the Member States to ensure that the objectives of the Treaty are achieved.

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His opposition to the adoration of designer's names, which even in the 1950s had reached ridiculous proportions all over Europe, caused controversy. When utility ware, such as teapots and cutlery, were seen as signed objects of worship, Franck saw good reason to question if this fascination for utility objects had gone too far. He rejected this personality cult and defined the role of the designer as just one member of a team of equals.

His thinking had links with the ideas of Le Corbusier, whose ideal utility objects became part of the environment over time - vernacular and anonymous objects that transcended the designer's personality. Rather than resting on the designer's name the product must stand on its own merits.

There is a recurring conflict in Finnish design; on the one hand there is a longing for simple mass-producible objects, and on the other, for highly expressive, individual pieces - Aalto's Savoy Vase and Franck's multi-coloured glass goblets (*Figure 8*) for example. Franck's work seems to be a balanced combination of the two: highly expressive yet simple and inconspicuous.

Although his belief in anonymity extended to the designer as well as the object, it is ironic that he shunned the star treatment because he reaped the harvest of his postwar creations by winning several prestigious awards. In 1955 he received the much coveted Scandinavian design award, The Lunning Prize. In 1957 he received the Grand Prize at the Milan Triennale and the even more coveted Compasso d'Oro. The only ones to receive this Italian prize for industrial design before Franck were the Museum of Modern Art and the architect Marcel Breuer.

1. The first part of the document is a letter from the President of the United States to the Congress, dated January 3, 1863.

2. The second part is a report from the Secretary of the Treasury, dated January 10, 1863.

3. The third part is a report from the Secretary of the Interior, dated January 15, 1863.

4. The fourth part is a report from the Secretary of the Navy, dated January 20, 1863.

5. The fifth part is a report from the Secretary of the War, dated January 25, 1863.

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8. The eighth part is a report from the Secretary of the Navy, dated February 10, 1863.

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10. The tenth part is a report from the Secretary of the Treasury, dated February 20, 1863.

11. The eleventh part is a report from the Secretary of the War, dated February 25, 1863.

12. The twelfth part is a report from the Secretary of the State, dated March 1, 1863.

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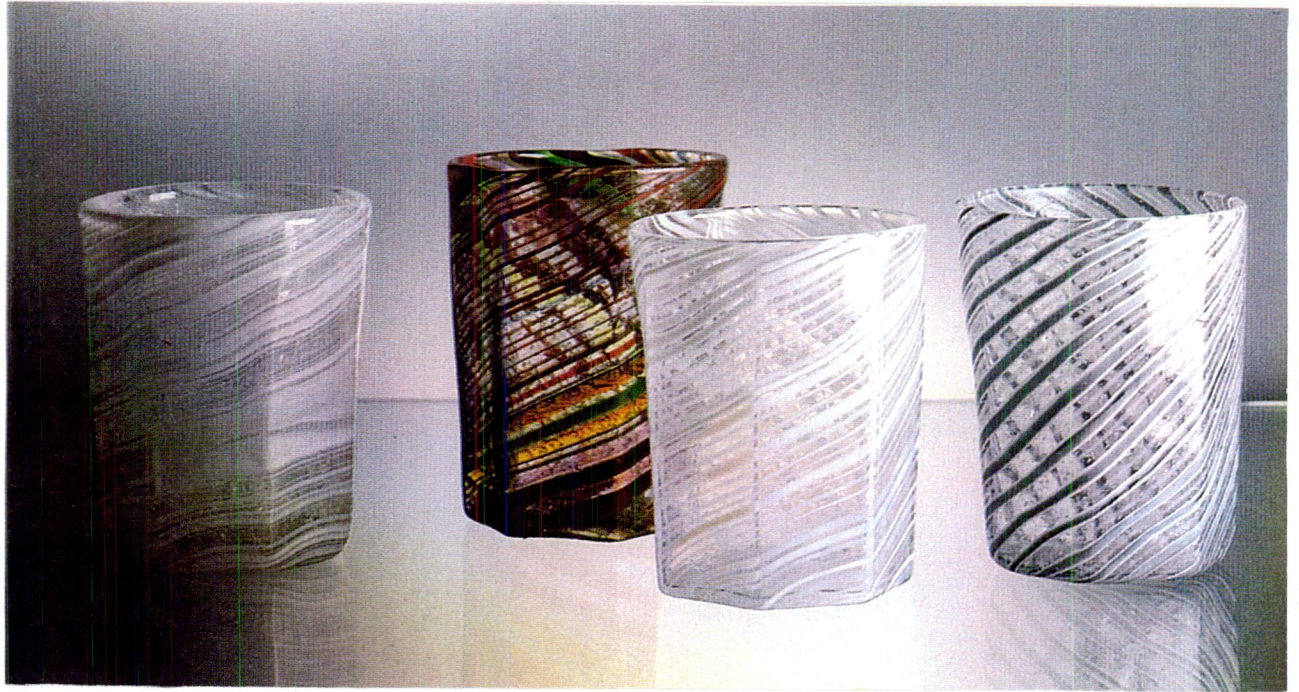
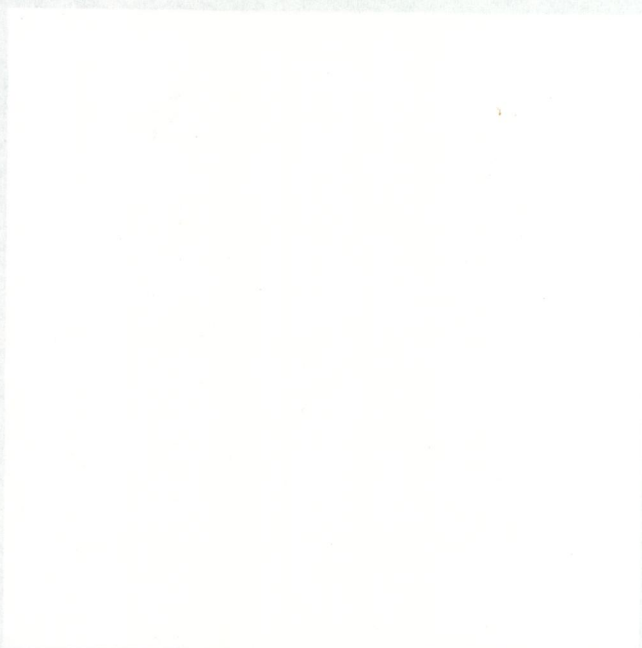


Figure 8
Multi-coloured glass goblets, Kaj Franck, (1950s-1970s)



In 1960 he left his position as Arabia's artistic director to become art director of the Institute of Industrial Arts. This proved to be a turning point in his life. As a teacher he was forced to re-examine the principles guiding his work as a designer. He also led the front line of young people that criticised the recent glittering achievements of Finnish designers. Again he renounced star-status and proposed acceptance of anonymous teamwork in design and production. Marketing especially should not use designer's names to promote utility objects, he believed. This lifelong desire for anonymity does not recognise the qualities of warmth, visual and tactile pleasure which makes Franck's designs eminently approachable. Nor does it fully account for the fact that his designs have become the unobtrusive, yet well-known, standard everyday ware in Finnish homes.

Like Aalto, his work emerged initially in response to his country's needs. He felt himself sincerely committed to re-building the country after the Second World War. Designers in Finland after the war faced entirely new conditions. In the 1940s Finland was faced with shortages and a restricted market. Only inexpensive production was possible. It was at this stage that the ancient economy of self-sufficiency and the beauty of austerity appeared to signal the way to the future. Reconstruction and an optimistic faith in the future revived the functionalist ideology of "beautiful everyday things".

It was Franck's wish that a basic set of articles providing a versatile service would be within everybody's reach: utility objects that were functional, reasonably priced and long lasting. His appointment as artistic director of Arabia² in 1945 meant the creation of a

²Arabia was founded in 1874 as a subsidiary of the Swedish Rörstrand. It is a large porcelain company, becoming an important enterprise soon after it broke away from the Swedish firm in 1916. For a period after World War Two, Arabia was Europe's largest manufacturer of ceramics, with a team of up to thirty artists - far more than any other similar company in Scandinavia could support.

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new line in the factory's output of utility ware. This new line took shape between 1948 and 1952. The result was the *Kilta* table ware service which went into production in 1953. At the time it was contemporary as well as having a sense of vernacular familiarity. Indeed, looking at *Kilta* now, (*Figure 9*) it's objects are just as modern today as when they first appeared. For Franck, could there be a more convincing proof of their timelessness?

Expressing Great Truths Through Small Objects

Franck shunned china made at that time, seeing it as wasteful. China was sold only in "sets", containing many pieces rarely used and taking up cupboard space. In place of these former complete services, a range was needed from which pieces could be purchased according to one's need. The idea was that it could always be added to.

One of Franck's policies for Arabia was to reject the idea of copying contemporary services. Up until then, the policy at Arabia had been to adapt Swedish versions and it was expected that Franck would emulate the popular Swedish models. Franck explained:

I also made such things, but if I hadn't made the Kilta series against the wishes of management, the I would have remained a nobody to the end of my days, who just did what he was told to do. (Franck, 1992, p51)

At last, the *Kilta* series did away with the idea of a complete service. It consisted of a collection of basic pieces. These were geometrical in shape, either round or rectangular - the latter finding tentative acceptance in the Finnish Ceramic industry via Functionalism.

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Figure 9.1
Kilta, Kaj Franck (1953)



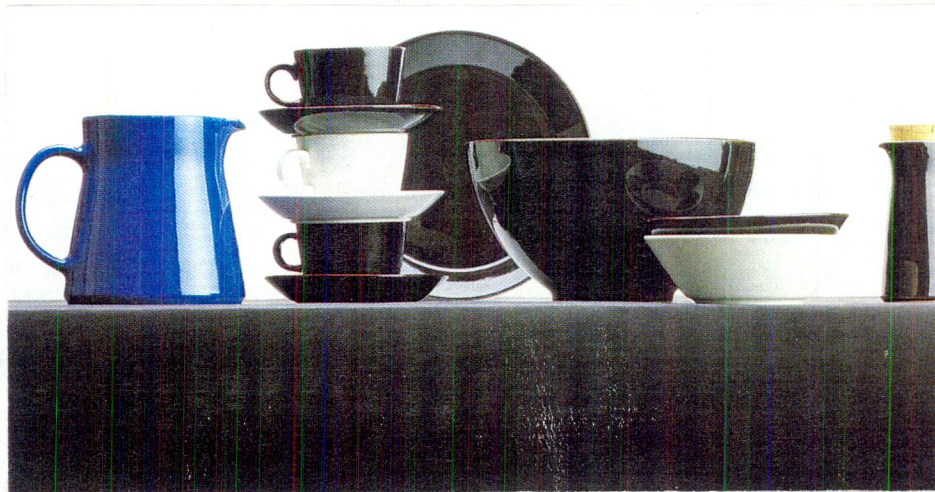


Figure 9.2
Kilta, Kaj Franck (1953)



They were shaped in an ingeniously natural way so as to be usable for many purposes - or on their own. They were easily stacked and went from fridge to oven to table. Each piece could serve a variety of purposes. The principle of rationalism was carried through from production in the factory to use in the kitchen: by leaving the handle off, a coffee mug became a sugar bowl, or by adding a spout it became a jug - and if need be, the same lid fitted all.

Saucers became more versatile because the cup recess was eliminated. If the cup broke, instead of becoming a "widow", the saucer could be used as a small dish, or even as a lid for the round bowl.

Franck thought that the wide, flat rim on a plate was inefficient - usually it was there to support a pattern - so he did away with it. Enlarging the centre of the plate enabled more attractive, uncrowded serving. He angled up the rim - an improvement for food with sauces - but also making the plate more useful and attractive on its own, or as a fruit bowl, for example.

All of these practical considerations made *Kilta* a remarkably versatile set. Franck tagged it with this revealing description: "*To Use For Anything*".

Kilta is made in five colours: white, black, yellow, green and blue. The colouring of *Kilta* solved two problems. One was that it would provide greater diversity as *Kilta* offered the opportunity of combining white and coloured pieces in an almost endless range of alternatives. Secondly, it solved the problem of decoration and unnecessary embellishment.

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With *Kilta*, Franck began a new phenomenon of mix-and-match: we take this concept so much for granted nowadays, especially in ceramics and textiles, that it is easy to forget how revolutionary Franck's notion was. Although to be more precise, the idea that things should blend and harmonise, rather than "match", was Franck's goal.

Fewer than 30,000 pieces of *Kilta* were made in 1953, the year it was first introduced. The following year production approached 170,000 pieces. Year after year sales grew to reach a million-piece annual production by 1958. By 1975 it was estimated that 25 million pieces of *Kilta* ware had been made. *Kilta* had come to mean anonymous "folk tableware". It was something that people bought as individual pieces whenever they needed a cup, bowl, or jug - just the way the designer had intended.

The Influence of the Vernacular and Nature

The name itself, *Kilta*, is Finnish for "guild". This was probably a reference to medieval craftsmen's associations, as Franck wanted to convey a familiar handmade feel in a factory-manufactured object. He often referred to the writings of William Morris and on one occasion he said the following about the importance of handicrafts: "*Real materials, correct materials, these are sacred conceptions that are not to be questioned*" (Franck, 1992, p26).

Like Aalto, he sought to lean from vernacular, utilitarian objects and handicrafts. The basic principle of functionalism, "Form Follows Function", is the same for peasant objects. The

1. The first part of the report deals with the general situation of the country and the position of the various groups.

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3. The third part deals with the social situation and the measures taken to improve it.

4. The fourth part deals with the political situation and the measures taken to improve it.

5. The fifth part deals with the cultural situation and the measures taken to improve it.

6. The sixth part deals with the international situation and the measures taken to improve it.

7. The seventh part deals with the future prospects of the country and the measures taken to improve it.

8. The eighth part deals with the conclusion of the report and the measures taken to improve it.

9. The ninth part deals with the annexes of the report and the measures taken to improve it.

10. The tenth part deals with the bibliography of the report and the measures taken to improve it.

11. The eleventh part deals with the index of the report and the measures taken to improve it.

12. The twelfth part deals with the list of figures and the measures taken to improve it.

13. The thirteenth part deals with the list of tables and the measures taken to improve it.

14. The fourteenth part deals with the list of references and the measures taken to improve it.

objects. The form of Finnish peasant objects, Franck realised, had been shaped for centuries and refined over time, according to practical requirements. So he went back to thinking about the original functions of household objects which time and continuous development had given simple, reduced forms.

Linked to this respect of peasant tradition was his way of observing nature. In a speech given at the Ostrobothnia Idea Forum in 1975, he said:

I can see a close relationship between the functionally beautiful object and the forms of nature. In its minutest detail the economical form of an egg, a husk, an intestine: organic forms and systems. (Franck, 1992, p26)

He was interested in anthropology and often gave examples of how primitive people regarded basic forms and materials. He made studies of crafts from Lapland. Japanese handicrafts also interested him and he saw a possible affinity between Japanese and Finnish expression of forms and materials. Although most Finnish designers feel a sense of continuity with their vernacular roots and folk approaches, few knew so much about ethnographic traditions as Kaj Franck. And it appears that indirectly he applied this knowledge because his designs suggest a refined primitiveness. However he had no wish to deliberately emphasise "Finnishness" - such a concept would be alien to him.

By the 1970s, *Kilta* had definitely become an international concept. Although in Finland, nobody referred to them as "Franck". As the designer intended, they were anonymous and nameless; only later were they celebrated as a pursuit of the ordinary. The objects in *Kilta* for example, are almost inconspicuous, quietly justifying their own existence. This gives a unique, almost paradoxical effect; they seem almost humble in their simplicity

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and yet at the same time, they are self-assured. Although they are stamped with Franck's principle of uncomplicated beauty, clarity of thought and purity of form, they are not cold, austere or rigid. To look at *Kilta*, nothing catches or disturbs the eye. The tactile qualities are smooth, soft - it is like an edge-free object. Roger Connah in his article describes holding a *Kilta* cup: "*..the index finger links through to touch the thumb. This time it grips the handle like a teacher might have gripped a pupil's ear. And tweaked it*" (Franck, 1992, p294).

Teema

In 1975 *Kilta* was eliminated from production, causing discussion in the press, with people demanding the set back. So in 1981 the series was updated and renamed *Teema* (Theme). The main difference from the former set was the material used. The old earthenware was replaced by stoneware. This made the objects more sturdy, but stoneware was also thinner and therefore more elegant. Technical developments enabled a cautious redesign of some of the pieces. Franck resisted the temptation to revamp the whole set - by doing this he retained the objects' original simplicity. Some would say the changes were hardly noticeable - his emphasis in redesigning was to further accomplish his original intentions.

Teema is composed of nineteen articles considered the basic dishes needed in the home. Like *Kilta* it has no one dominating form so that other dishes can be added to complement the setting.

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One aspect of *Teema* which did not please him was the higher cost of the new material.

Kilta in its time was revolutionary because of its reasonable price. *Teema* however still represents high-functioning tableware of an aesthetically high quality (*Figure 10*).

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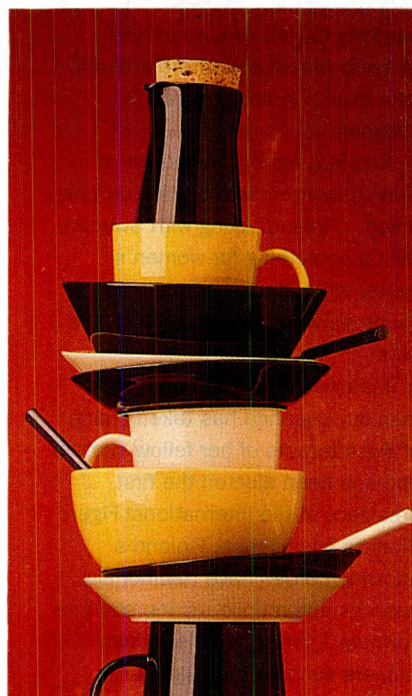


Figure 10
Teema, Kaj Franck (1981)

regularly to Helsinki, where her father is Mayor and where she will take exams in economics this summer.

She is a fervent supporter of Finnish membership of the European Union. "Finland, along with Sweden, will do something for women's rights, although the southern countries won't be too happy," she says.

Meanwhile, in true democratic fashion, Susanna has taken charge of the interests of her fellow skaters and has been elected the first president of the International Figure Skaters Association. Finland's sporting heroes have traditionally been its automobile racers, such as Formula 1 driver Mika Hakkinen, winners such as the legendary

CHAPTER FOUR

THE STORY OF THE "ESKIMO WOMAN'S LEATHER BREECHES"

In 1936 Karhula-Iittala Finnish Glassworks decided to hold a competition to find new utility and art glass designs for the Paris World Exhibition. A large group of Finnish glass designers and architects of the younger generation were invited to take part in the competition. The winning submission by Alvar Aalto included about a dozen free-form objects, ranging from a shallow dish to a tall, metre-high vase. The designs were sketched freely on paper and cardboard and were drawn using pencil, ink and crayon of different colours. The effect was like a modern collage. They were accompanied by a typed explanation of the objects' uses. The entry was proposed under the name "*Eskimoerindens Skinnbuxa*" meaning "Eskimo Woman's Leather Breeches", as Aalto joked that the shape of his mother's bloomers was really his inspiration for the vase. Awarding this design first place was a bold decision seeing that the design was completely unconventional and technologically unproven (*Figure 11*).

Later used in the Savoy Restaurant in Helsinki (also designed by Aalto), the glassware quickly became known as the Savoy Vase. In the 1970s the most popular model in the series was renamed after its creator. When you mention it as the Aalto Vase in Finland, everybody knows to what you are referring.

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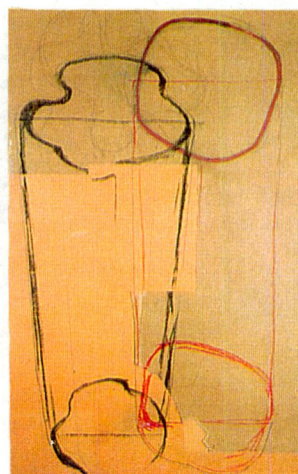
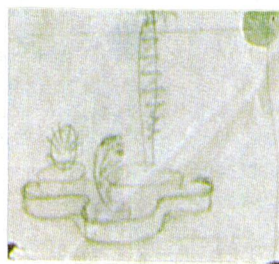
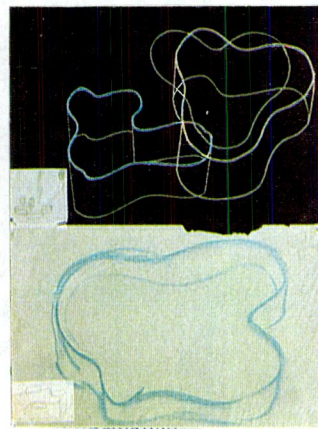
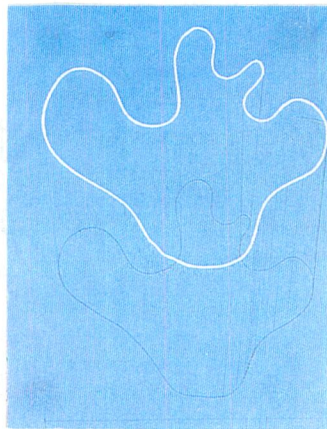


Figure 11
Original drawings for Aalto Vase (1936)



and showed the ease with which he could interpret and apply his instinct for organic design into another medium (*Figure 12.1 & 12.2*).

In Europe, the vase aroused great interest, being distinct from the standard forms of traditional glass design. The principle of symmetry had been accepted so unquestioningly in the history of glass design that not even the Bauhaus had threatened it. Indeed, the Bauhaus's interest in geometric forms probably reinforced the principle of symmetry. So Aalto's decision to break the basic rule was radically innovative. The idea of free-floating, biomorphic forms was revolutionary in glassware. Also significant was the fact that there was no fixed formula for the number of curves - the rhythm of large and small curves could vary between each type (*Figure 13*).

The Conflict Between Beauty and Utility

This vase, though, is an example of the recurring conflict in Finnish design. As a functionalist, Aalto was against luxury goods, preferring to design standard, inexpensive wares. He has been known to say that he would prefer to design suitcases rather than crystal bowls. Designing the Aalto Vase, according to Altti Kuusamo, goes against the principles of functionalism. "*There is too much organic and artistic surplus value in it*" (The Finnish Institute Yearbook, 1994, p46). Thus his most significant creation was, in some ways, in conflict with his principles.



Figure 12.1
Aalto Vase (1936)

iittala  nuutajärvi oy



Figure 12.2
Aalto Vase (1936)



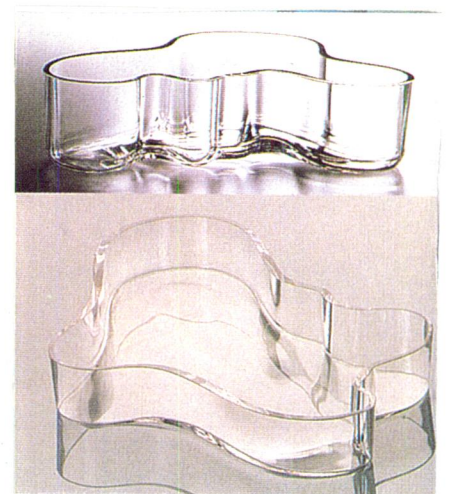
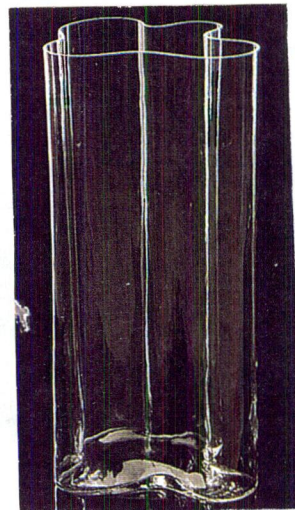
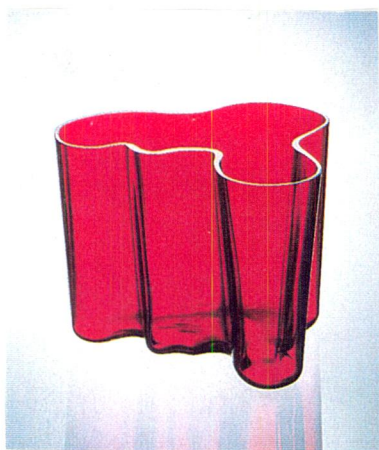
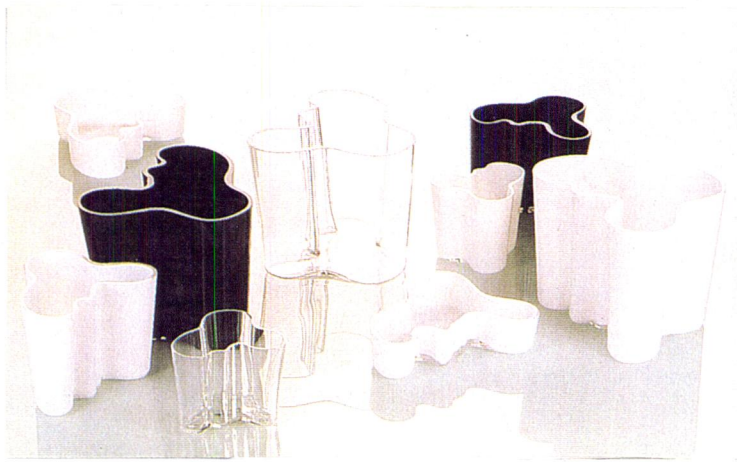


Figure 13.1
Different sizes of vase



























			
3030.050.00 bowl schale clear / klar 50 mm/2"/1	3030.050.02 bowl schale opal 50 mm/2"/1	3030.050.06 bowl schale blue / blau 50 mm/2"/1	3028.380.02 bowl schale opal 380mm/50mm 15"/2"/1
			
3030.095.00 vase clear / klar 95 mm/3 3/4"/1	3030.095.02 vase opal 95 mm/3 3/4"/1	3030.095.16 vase light blue / hellblau 95 mm/3 3/4"/1	3028.380.00 bowl schale clear / klar 380 mm/50 mm 15"/2"/1
			
3030.120.00 vase clear / klar 120 mm/4 3/4"/1	3030.120.02 vase opal 120 mm/4 3/4"/1	3030.120.05 vase cobalt blue kobaltblau 120 mm/4 3/4"/1	3030.120.06 vase blue / blau 120 mm/4 3/4"/1
			
3030.120.16 vase light blue / hellblau 120 mm/4 3/4"/1	3030.160.00 vase clear / klar 160 mm/6 1/4"/1	3030.160.02 vase opal 160 mm/6 1/4"/1	3030.160.05 vase cobalt blue kobaltblau 160 mm/6 1/4"/1
			
3030.160.06 vase blue / blau 160 mm/6 1/4"/1	3030.160.16 vase light blue / hellblau 160 mm/6 1/4"/1	3025.000.00 vase clear / klar	3031.200.00 vase clear / klar 200 mm/8"/1
		3025.000.02 opal 175 mm/7"/1	
			
3031.200.02 vase opal 200 mm/8"/1	3031.600.00 vase clear / klar 600 mm/23"/1	3032.220.00 vase clear / klar 220 mm/8 3/4"/1	3032.360.00 vase clear / klar 360 mm/14"/1

Figure 13.2
Different sizes of vase



To counteract this he suggested the glassware for practical uses, such as "*serving dishes, fruit bowls or to hold pots in a cactus garden*" (Iittala Booklet). He never intended the vase to become an exhibition object although it has been selected by museums worldwide for their collections. Rather he created it as both a utility and decorative vase suitable for any home. This concept is supported by Aalto himself:

An object doesn't have to be a final product: on the contrary, it should be manufactured so that people themselves, guided by their own individual rules, can bring its form to perfection. (Iittala Booklet)

Like Kaj Franck, he intended the owner to determine its use and place. Personally, the idea of fruit or plants inside the vase diminish its simple beauty, it is beautiful enough to stand on its own - its simplicity all the more stark and apparent. But it is left to the individual to choose its function which, like its form, is varied (*Figure 14*).

It is this delicate balance, created between form and function that design in Finland has managed to achieve. Perhaps it is how these two ideas work together, combined with the *material* used (in this case glass) that gives such an effect of harmony and balance. This idea became, in this century, the principle of "truth to material". Aalto and Franck allowed the work done earlier by applied motifs to pass over into the form of the object. It becomes difficult to distinguish between the form of the object, and its decorative value - it does not need to be differentiated, they are one and the same for Finnish design. Le Corbusier advises that

Only nature can give us inspiration, can be true, can provide a basis for the work of mankind. But don't treat nature like the landscapists who show

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Figure 14
Different uses for vase



us only its appearance. Study its causes, forms and vital development and synthesise them in the creation of ornaments. (Brett, 1992, p94)

The Connecton Between Beauty and Utility is "Organic"

The vase, on its own, exudes a feeling of serenity. Here again the link Aalto wanted to maintain between nature and the individual is apparent. One senses, in its undulating curves, the freely meandering outlines of Finnish lakeland scenery.

The motif is absorbed into the form of the whole object, so that while it is "undecorated" in that it has no applied motifs - it is itself decorative. The object is then seen to be beautiful in the way that objects in nature are beautiful; the connection between beauty and function is "organic". (Brett, 1992, p67)

So wrote David Brett when describing *Clutha* - glassware designed by Christopher Dresser. It could also be applied to Aalto's vase.

More than any other object, its form seems to allude in some general way to untouched nature and it really appears that these forms seem to generate the feeling that they are icons of Finnish nature - or even more, that they symbolise Finland itself.

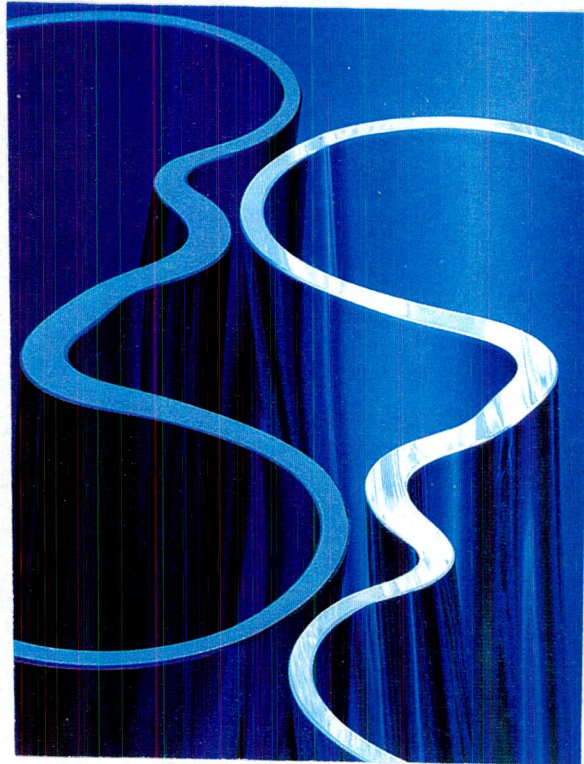


Figure 15
Aalto vase, suggests the freely, meandering forms of Finnish scenery





Figure 16
Clutha, Christopher Dresser (1883)



CONCLUSION

References to the clarity and uncomplicated beauty of Finnish design may sound trivial at this stage. Such words everybody associates with design in Finland - practical, durable, timeless and simple. Yet it is the very fact that they come from Finland, with its respect and appreciation for their vernacular traditions, nature and its materials and concern for the consumer that makes Finnish design distinctive.

Here I feel that other European designers have lost sight of such basic concerns. Their designs lack balance and restraint and become cluttered and overdone. On the other hand, they become cold and austere, lacking in human warmth.

Franck, like Aalto before him, was independent enough to reject the trappings of other European designs. There is no mimicry, no make-believe. Their designs spring from indigenous Finnish characteristics, and of course, the function for which they were intended. Their designs are inconspicuous, quietly fitting into their environment and justifying their own existence.

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- STILTAUORI, Eeva, "A Dream of a Timeless Object", Förm, Finland, Finland, No. 3, 1987

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